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The Tuning Project: The Development of Competences for Occupational Therapy Practice and Education in Europe¹

Sarah Kantartzis, MScOT, former President of ENOTHE*

The Tuning Project is directly related to the Bologna Declaration and the resulting process which outlined a framework for a common higher education policy within Europe. Of particular importance in the Bologna process is the implementation throughout Europe by 2010 of a degree system of three cycles of higher education (equivalent to Bachelor, Master and Doctoral levels) with access from one cycle to the next, with the recognition of degrees and study periods assisted by the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System and Diploma Supplements (Confederation of EU Rector's Conferences & the Association of European Universities, 2002).

The Bologna process and the resulting reforms led to the need for the higher educational institutions to discuss the structure and content of their educational programmes. In 2000, with the initiative of the European University Association and with the support of the European Commission, 100 universities participated in the first phase of the Tuning project. The Tuning Project aims to describe the structure and content of educational programmes in line with the Bologna process. The aim of the project is to 'tune – in' educational programmes, to develop mutual understanding, and not to enforce rigid adherence to a common European prototype. The Tuning project includes all countries of Europe, disciplines involved include Business, Chemistry, Earth Science, Education, European Studies, History, Mathematics, Nursing, Occupational Therapy, and Physics. The Tuning project has now been extended to Latin America and further countries are considering participation (Tuning management committee, 2006).

To achieve its aims the Tuning Project developed a methodology that is common for all disciplines who participate in the project (Gonzalez & Wagenaar, 2003). Cooperation is required between the academics and the professionals working in each discipline in order to describe the contemporary professional and educational nature of the discipline, a description which is then discussed and validated by the European networks and relevant stakeholders. Discussions in each discipline are organized around five lines:

- The generic competences
- The subject specific competences
- The role of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) as a European credit accumulation system
- Approaches to learning, teaching and assessment
- The role of quality enhancement and assurance in the educational process (at programme level)

As a result of this process a document, a professional profile, is produced for each discipline/ profession. It contains full information on all five lines as they refer to the specific discipline.

¹ This article is based on the presentation made at the annual meeting of the Italian Association, "Le competenze specifiche del terapeuta occupazionale: l'importanza di un linguaggio comune". Rome, March 8th 2008

As each document completes the Tuning process this document is made available on the tuning web site (<http://tuning.unideusto.org>). For occupational therapy this document has also been developed into a book which is available from the ENOTHE office² (The Tuning Occupational Therapy Project Group 2008).

The Tuning Project and Occupational Therapy

In 2003 the Tuning project was introduced to ENOTHE (European Network of Occupational Therapy in Higher Education) at the annual meeting of the network. On behalf of COTEC (Council of Occupational Therapists for the European Countries) and ENOTHE a working group was formed with the aim of coordinating the Tuning Project for occupational therapy. The Tuning Occupational Therapy Project Group consisted of three delegates from COTEC (including the President) and the six members of the ENOTHE board and the coordinator of the Thematic Network.

The Profile of Occupational Therapy that was developed according to the Tuning template, was based on the existing and ongoing work of ENOTHE and COTEC. For example earlier work of ENOTHE was related to the implementation of ECTS, competence based learning/learning outcomes (ENOTHE 2000a,b, 2004b), reflection on different teaching/and learning methods such as PBL, e-learning, teaching practical skills (ENOTHE 2000c, 2004b,c,d), as well as quality enhancement through international peer review (ENOTHE 2004a). Additional information regarding the profession was provided by national associations and COTEC. The main focus of the Tuning Occupational Therapy Project Group became the development of the specific competences for occupational therapy.

Generic and subject specific competences

The Tuning project has developed this definition of competences:

“They represent a dynamic combination of cognitive and metacognitive skills, knowledge and understanding, interpersonal, intellectual and practical skills and ethical values” (Gonzalez & Wagenaar 2007, p.139)

The Tuning project has identified two types of competences: generic and subject specific. Generic competences are transferable skills common to all university programmes, for example, research skills, knowledge of a second language, interpersonal and teamwork skills, decision making and critical abilities. They are considered particularly important for future employability and citizenship (Gonzalez and Wagenaar, 2005). The generic competences were defined by the central Tuning Group.

Subject specific competences are specific to each discipline or profession and are developed by each discipline using the methodology developed by the Tuning project. Occupational Therapy competences refer to the performance of the occupational therapy practitioner and are the competences that guide the whole educational programme in occupational therapy. For this reason the competences were developed through a close collaboration between educators (ENOTHE) and professionals (COTEC).

It is important to note that the European occupational therapy competences describe what an occupational therapist does, they are broad statements and are therefore not absolute but are

² ENOTHE office, Hogeschool van Amsterdam, www.enothe.hva.nl

on a continuum and can be developed throughout the person's working life and are therefore possessed by people to varying degrees. They do not describe a specific level of professional practice, for example that of a newly qualified graduate, or a particular level of education, for example 1st cycle/ Bachelor level. For the description of a particular level of education Cycle Level Descriptors are developed, based on the competences and the Dublin Descriptors³, and which describe the expected Learning Outcomes for the particular level of studies, for example 1st cycle/Bachelor level.

Development of occupational therapy competences

The first drafted subject specific competences by the Tuning OT Project Group was based on earlier work completed by the WFOT (Hocking & Ness 2002), the College of Occupational Therapists in the UK (Turner 2004), the Australian Association of Occupational Therapists (Ford & Tonkin 1994), the Canadian Association for Occupational Therapists (CAOT 1998) as well as European Curriculum Guidelines (Howard & Lancee 2000) and Standards of Practice (COTEC 1996). The drafted competences were also based on all available European curricula for master degrees in occupational therapy. The fifty-four competences were defined under the following headings:

- Knowledge of occupational therapy
- Occupational therapy process and professional reasoning
- Professional relationships and partnerships
- Professional autonomy and accountability
- Research and development in occupational therapy/science
- Management and promotion of occupational therapy

Feedback on the drafted competences was received from focus groups held during the ENOTHE annual meetings (2004 and 2005), which included all participants and represented 170 higher educational institutions that are members of ENOTHE as well as the COTEC delegates. Likewise the competences were discussed at COTEC council meetings (2004, 2005 and 2006). Following the Tuning methodology, three groups, occupational therapists/practitioners, academics and students in occupational therapy programmes, had the opportunity to feed back and rate importance on the generic and subject specific competences through an online survey (May 2005). These groups, in 33 European countries, were motivated by the Tuning OT Project Group through their national occupational therapy associations to answer the survey. To facilitate responses the generic and subject specific competences were translated into 22 European languages and were available on the ENOTHE web site. 1450 responses were received giving strong overall support for the competences. Following the questionnaire there was another period of consultation through focus groups with members of ENOTHE and COTEC, and then critical analysis and discussions within the project group. As a result the number of competences was reduced to thirty-five and the wording was refined. Throughout these years there was an open feedback process from

³ The Dublin Descriptors, have been developed by the European 'Joint Quality Initiative Group', and are generic statements of typical expectations of achievements and abilities on completion of each cycle relevant for all disciplines/ professions. They have been adopted by the Bergen Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education in 2005, as part of the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA (European Higher Education Area) (<http://www.jointquality.nl/>)

COTEC and ENOTHE including ECOTROS (the European Cooperation for Occupational Therapy Research and Occupational Science).

From December 2005 to March 2006 a consultation process was carried out with relevant stakeholders and responses were received from employers and client groups in eighteen European countries. The results demonstrated a clear recommendation supporting the competences.

In April 2006 the Description or Profile of Occupational Therapy Education in Europe, including the competences, was completed and made available on the Tuning website. In June 2007 a Validation Meeting was called by the European Commission where selected experts, representing educators, client groups, regulators, the WHO, and practitioners were invited to comment on the entire Profile of Occupational Therapy. The group of experts met with the Tuning occupational therapy project group for a day of intense discussions, following which strong support for the competences and the professional profile was received, with recommendations for improvement. The Tuning Occupational Therapy project group continued to work on the Profile of Occupational Therapy and it has been published as a book in May 2008, with the title 'Reference Points for the Design and Delivery of Degree Programmes in Occupational Therapy' (Tuning Occupational Therapy Project Group 2008), with the validation of the group of experts.

Discussion regarding the development of the competences⁴

During the development of the competences a number of issues were considered. Firstly there was a conscious attempt to be proactive. While competences should reflect current practice it was believed that competences should also provide a future direction for the profession. Current practice trends are for occupational therapy to move away from traditional models of medical services to include community based and socially orientated practice. It is intended that the competences should provide a general, overall direction or framework for education and practice, enabling the incorporation of future changes and developments.

Secondly it was important to consider the wide range of practice throughout Europe. Although the underlying philosophy and theories of the profession are common, practice itself varies between countries. It was necessary to negotiate a middle way when defining the competences so that it will be possible for programmes to decide to what depth to develop each competence according to the local practice requirements.

Regarding terminology, during development of the competences underlying theoretical concepts were discussed and analysed. It was inevitable that specific terminology was used and that underlying theoretical foundations are evident in the final competences. However at all times attempts were made to use as wide a theoretical base as possible without reference to, or reliance on one specific school of thought.

Implementation of competences

Finally it is useful to consider the future implications of the implementation of competences throughout Europe. First it is important to stress that Occupational Therapy Tuning Profile

⁴ This discussion is based on Kantartzis, S. & Ness, N.E. (2007). Developing Subject Specific Competences and Cycle Level Descriptors for Occupational Therapy in Europe through the Tuning Process. *The World Federation of Occupational Therapists Bulletin*. **56** 14-31.

provides ideas and resources (and not rules to follow), which will support and ensure that occupational therapy education and practice fulfills European expectations (according to the Bologna Declaration and Process and the Dublin Descriptors). In order to provide maximum benefits the competences should be discussed and agreed upon by all involved in occupational therapy education and practice within each country, e.g. ministries of education and health, regulatory bodies, educational programmes, national associations, practitioners and academics. Competences should reflect the particular health and societal needs of each country; they should reflect the context in which the practitioners will be working.

In education the level descriptors, based on the generic and occupational therapy competences and the Dublin Descriptors, will ensure that the education programme fulfills the European expectations of the particular cycle level and is compliant with WFOT minimum standards. This will facilitate the recognition of awards (or degrees) for entry to the next level of education. The implementation of competences also indicates a move from teacher-centered and subject-centered education towards competence and student-centered education. The development of programmes based on the competences required of the graduate, that describe the expected achievements of the students in terms of learning outcomes related to the ECTS, ensures that the teaching, learning and assessment methods are all focused on achieving these outcomes. The students are active participants in the development of their competences, becoming increasingly skilled at recognizing and supplying their own learning needs. This becomes a foundation for practitioners who actively engage in their ongoing professional development throughout their working lives.

Regarding practice, new professionals will be able to articulate their competence and more easily define aspects of practice that they would like to or need to develop. This process can continue throughout their professional lives and competences can form the basis of continuing professional development portfolios and statements. National associations can use the competences as the base for continuing professional development programmes so that both associations and the individual practitioner have a common framework for professional development. As the competences are based on the identified social and health needs of each country and not just on existing practice areas, they will also help to ensure that occupational therapy practice is comprehensive and includes emerging and new areas of practice. Competences are the base for the new guidelines for the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice of COTEC.

Competences ensure transferability and transparency of awards. At a national level they can be used by regulators (the authorities responsible for the recognition of degrees) when evaluating the qualifications of an occupational therapist seeking employment in another country. At a more local level employers may use the competences to identify the level of service they require from an occupational therapist and therefore the competences may be used as a workforce planning tool. They can also be used by employers to set and monitor quality standards both for individual practitioners and at a service level. In recruitment, they can be used to establish the competences required for the particular job/post and the competences of an applicant.

Finally for service users if the competences are used to underpin standards of practice, they can be assured that there will be some assurance of the quality of the service. Also if the competences are developed, reviewed and updated at national level, this will help to ensure the ongoing relevance of practice to the health and social needs of each country, which will ensure high standards of relevant practice for every service user.

Conclusion

The Tuning process represented an excellent opportunity for occupational therapists in Europe to describe their profession and education. Educational programmes were able to describe their programmes while at the same time seeing them within a wider European context. The process of consultation throughout the development of the competences and the Profile of Occupational Therapy meant that a large number of educators were involved in reflection and debate regarding all the Tuning lines but in particular the competences and competency based learning. The translation of the competences into 22 languages provided a further stimulation enabling even more institutions to participate in debate at both local and European level.

At national levels there are indications that the Tuning process is beginning to have a significant influence. Some countries are using the competences as a common framework for the development of educational programmes. Within individual programmes there are reports that modules are being revised or developed using a Tuning framework of competences, learning outcomes, and ECTS, with favourable comments on the clarity and structure offered.

Competences provide clarity, transparency and transferability. They also provide flexibility and the possibility for national characteristics in health and social care to be identified and incorporated. It is believed that as further countries, educational programmes and associations begin to implement the competences, their experiences will form the basis for ongoing debate, the exchange of good practice and of areas of concern, which will benefit the ongoing development of mutual understanding and high standards throughout occupational therapy education and practice in Europe.

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